

Consider these errors like the dangerous suspects in “Wanted” posters: Spot and arrest them before they cripple your story, our writer says.

# The usual SUSPECTS

The first of a two-part article on the 6 MOST COMMON ERRORS in fiction writing; this month’s miscreants are *errors of structure*

By Peter Selgin

**I** READ THEM all the time. Stories where scenes vanish before my very eyes, where the point of view is as slippery as a greased frog, where authors play hide and seek with vital statistics; stories that should be memoirs and memoirs that should have been stories—not to mention stories so fundamentally clichéd that they ought never to have been written at all. These are mistakes so frequent and glaring that I can practically see them through the envelopes they’re sent in to the magazine I edit, or so it feels.

Six: That is the number of common fundamental errors I’ve discovered in my years of reading both as a teacher and as an editor. I’ve assembled them here and in next month’s issue of *The Writer* in the equivalent of a police lineup so that you’ll recognize them in your own stories. When you do, consider them armed and dangerous and terminate with extreme prejudice.

Here are the first three suspects:

**1** **Default omniscience—or “The Whose-Shoes-Am-I-In, Anyway?” Syndrome:** *The failure to properly invest, orchestrate or otherwise handle point of view.*

Marshall McLuhan said, “The medium is the message.” This is certainly so with fiction. A story or a novel is as much about how it is told—by means of what structure, through what voice or voices, and from which viewpoint(s)—as about *what*. In fiction, means and ends are inseparable; method *is* substance.

At any given moment, a story or a novel must present us with a particular point of view, whether it’s that of a character or characters in the story, or that of an outside observer or so-called omniscient narrator. But a choice must be made. You can have all the ingredients—a plot, characters, dialogue, description, setting, conflict—but if they

aren’t bound by a specific, consistent and rigorously controlled point of view, you still end up with nothing.

When I encounter point-of-view errors in workshop, I write in fat letters across the board, NO POINT OF VIEW = NO STORY. I’m not talking about minor gaffes and glitches (“As Sally gazed out her bedroom window, she heard the door click open behind her and Jack stood there.”). I mean errors so fundamental that no amount of editing can set them right, global blunders that call into question not only an author’s grasp of a particular moment in a scene or story, but fiction’s primary purpose, which is to render *subjective* experience—personal experience particular to an individual—and to do so as vividly and concretely as possible.

Fiction’s stock in trade is subjectivity. And all experience is subjective. In fiction, things happen only to the extent that they affect some character or characters. Subjectivity requires a nervous system, and owes its existence to the fact that no two nervous systems respond to stimuli in exactly the same way. To be authentic, experiences need to pass through a kind of filter: They must be sorted and sifted either through the sensibility of a particular character or set of



characters, or through the mindset of an omniscient narrator, or through an impersonal, objective filter that edits out all subjective content (feelings and thoughts), relying on readers to supply the missing subjective element (Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants” springs instantly to mind). The filter may enhance or extract, but there must be a filter. Information conveyed to the reader with this filter missing or inconsistent is equivalent to wine served without a glass. Impossible? Precisely.

Consider the following paragraph:

Hank could have passed for Lila’s grandfather. His white mustache added to his years, yet he kept himself trim and thought himself as fit as the younger fathers. He was nuts about Lila, who still loved him, though lately she’d grown distant. She was no longer his little girl; in fact, she secretly wished that he would act his age. But all adolescent girls pass through a phase where they hold all fathers in mild contempt.

At first glance there seems to be nothing wrong with this. But on closer inspection, problems arise. While the

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first sentence (“Hank could have passed for Lila’s grandfather”) adopts a neutral, objective stance, the second sentence shifts us firmly into Hank’s (“thought himself as fit as”) personal and subjective point of view. Though it presumes to know Lila’s feelings about him, the third sentence could arguably still be from Hank’s personal subjective viewpoint. But then—lest we assume that Lila’s secret isn’t a secret—the fourth sentence plants us firmly in Lila’s consciousness, while the final sentence takes a global, omniscient view of all adolescent girls’ relationships with their fathers. The cumulative result of all these subtle shifts is that the reader never knows quite where she stands; the point of view is never clear, and our emotional response to characters and story is likewise blurry.

Of all the problems plaguing amateur works, none is more common or fatal than the mishandling of viewpoint. Typically, the problem results not from a chosen viewpoint being violated

(though this, too, happens frequently), but because no viewpoint has been firmly established to start with, so there is

nothing to violate.

In a story about a waitress named Linda, we read, “People didn’t think Linda was as pretty as she used to be.” Arguably, this could be Linda’s own view of things; if so, it’s a harsh view, presented with the blunt objectivity of a Gallup poll. Earlier in the story we are told, “Linda was a waitress and an alcoholic; everyone knew that.” Here, too, the point of view could *arguably* be Linda’s. But it’s a lame argument, since alcoholics are generally the last people to label themselves as such. And since this pronouncement is made early in the story (first paragraph), readers can’t be blamed for taking it not as Linda’s subjective opinion but as an omniscient narrator’s objective verdict.

Ultimately, though, this turns out to be Linda’s story, presented to us, by and large, from her viewpoint. So I’m thrown by those moments when the viewpoint turns objective, with statements like, “Lately, people had been all too concerned about Linda.” (Presumably, these are the same people who think Linda’s looks aren’t what they used to be.) Or is this Linda’s subjective viewpoint wearing an omniscient, objective mask? At the very least it’s confusing. At worst, it’s inauthentic and unconvincing.

But the problem here goes deeper. The problem is that the author hasn't taken the trouble to embed herself sufficiently into her character's psyche—or into any particular psyche or mind-set. Had she done so, none of these lapses would have occurred.

Another example: In a story in which 8-year-old Aidan takes his first plane trip to France, the author sabotages his POV strategy (and his story with it) in three ways. First, he strays into passive constructions (“It was the longest plane trip that Aidan had ever been on.”) that locate the viewpoint just beyond the character's personal, subjective experience (as opposed to “Aidan yawned and shifted in his seat; he'd never been on such a long plane ride before.”). Then he drifts into an inadvertent omniscience (“They [Aidan and his kid sister] knew they had better behave themselves.”). And finally, he slips into diction that yanks us thoroughly out of Aidan's 8-year-old psyche (“The only dietary adjustment was having to eat goat's milk for breakfast,” versus “Aidan spat out his breakfast: his mother had served it to him with goat's milk. It tasted like his armpit.”). In each instance, the author has failed to *be* Aidan, to plant himself—and the reader along with him—firmly in Aidan's psyche, to see, feel, think, act and react with him.

By resisting such immersion and commitment, by insisting on mixing our own views with those of our narrators or our characters, we keep readers at a vague, inconsistent distance. The resulting experience is neither Aidan's nor Linda's nor that of a rigorously omniscient narrator, but what I call *default omniscience*: omniscience without plan, passion or purpose, which fails to provide us with a consistent, reliable perspective. It does the opposite, and muddies things up.

Does this mean we shouldn't create omniscient narratives, that we should restrict ourselves to a single, limited point of view? No, it means only that we should do so knowingly. Almost anything we do in our fiction, no matter how outrageous or experimental, can work if done consistently. For proof, I offer this paragraph from Giuseppe di Lampedusa's *The Leopard*:

Now, as the voices fell silent, everything dropped back into its usual order or disorder. Benedico, the Great Dane, grieved at exclusion, came wagging its tail through the door by which the servants had left. The women rose slowly to their feet, their oscillating skirts as they withdrew baring bit by bit the naked figures from mythology painted all over the milky depths of the tiles. Only an Andromeda remained covered by the soutane of Father Pirrone, still deep in extra prayer, and it was some time before she could sight the silvery Perseus swooping down to her aid and her kiss.

Here, true omniscience allows di Lampedusa to enter the mind not only of a Great Dane, but of a mythological figure painted into the floor tiles of the Sicilian villa in which his story is set—all in a paragraph. This is omniscience carried to an extreme. Yet because it is done consistently and with conviction, it goes down like good wine.

But too often, writers simply neglect to make this most crucial of choices. They assume that point of view isn't important, or that it's something that can be fixed later. Which is like getting a flu shot after you've caught the flu.

Let either your characters' or your omniscient narrators' viewpoints serve as the organizing principle for your stories. Nothing should reach the reader that hasn't passed through this point-of-view filter. Point of view is the rock on which fiction is built.

**2** **The disappearing scene, or The Bait-and-Switch Syndrome: Failure to distinguish between background, flashback and present story.** Having been brought up on movies and television, we're used to having our stories shuffled and sliced, with flashbacks and flash-forwards turning time into a carnival ride. This time shuffling has gone on since Homer, but in movies and TV shows, flashback is no longer spice or condiment but bread and butter. Understandably, fiction writers, not wanting to eat the dust of their slick showbiz

brethren, feel compelled to play their own games with time. Hence the proliferations of stories and novels jammed with flashbacks, framing devices and other time-manipulating machines.

Competing on any level with movies and television is, I think, a mistake. They have technology on their side; we don't. They have stars and multimillion-dollar budgets; we don't. They have passive audiences slumped in plush seats; we don't. They dazzle their viewers with special effects; we can't, and shouldn't have to. Readers read because they love stories and the language that stories are made of. They don't want substitutes for cinema; they don't *need* special effects. What they demand from works of literature they don't expect from movies, and vice-versa. What can we give them that movies can't? Well, for a start, good *writing*. And not just good; the best.

I don't mean to imply that screenplays can't be brilliant. Of course they can. But language is not their medium.

That said, gimmicks are seductive, and none is more seductive than the flashback. The very term suggests flashiness. The problem is that like all bells and whistles, such devices tend to be overused and abused. When, a page or two into a story, I am yanked out of the present action and into a flashback, I feel cheated. I feel cheated because I had begun to invest in a set of characters and circumstances, only to have my investment nullified: I have to start investing all over again.

With good flashbacks, this doesn't happen. A good flashback increases and deepens my investment. If it sweeps me out of the present action, it does so only temporarily, just long enough to add to my appreciation and understanding of the characters in their present situation. But give nine out of 10 inexperienced writers a flashback, and they'll use it more or less as a pilot uses his ejector seat, to bail out of a story that's about to

crash, or that can't get off the ground. Occasionally, the ejector button parachutes us into a better story, begging the question: Why open with a lousy story to begin with?

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Most flashbacks aren't real flashbacks at all, but stories embedded within stories or framing devices. But they don't always work. For example: A novel opens with someone getting up, getting dressed, brushing his teeth. As he stands before the mirror, his mouth foamy with toothpaste, Hank recalls his date the night before. White space. The scene shifts: We're in the Côte d'Azur lounge of the Cheval Blanc eating escargot. For the next eight pages, we're with Hank on his date. What of the tooth-brushing scene? Gone up in a cloud of flashback, never to be seen again. And though the loss may be small, the reader may wonder why the author wrote that banal opening to begin with if only to jettison it.

Typically, writers abuse flashbacks because a) they don't know where their stories really begin, or b) they aren't sure what story they're telling, or that they have one to tell.

**3 False suspense, or The Guess-Who-My-Protagonist-Is Syndrome: *The capricious withholding of information and/or the failure to provide vital statistics.*** A fiction writer's job is to tell stories, not hide them. So often, as a teacher and an editor of a literary journal, I read stories where, within the first pages, I find myself asking: Who is this person? Man or woman? Name? Age? And—the ultimate question born of such questions and others like them—what the hell am I reading, and why?

In effect, such an author tells readers: Keep reading and I'll give you my heroine's name and what country she's in and who has just flung open the door to her boudoir and announced, "Vidor is dead!" (And who in blazes—you rightfully demand—is Vidor? That information, too, will be offered in good time.)

The problem with such a strategy is

**NEXT MONTH:** The writer discusses three more of "the usual suspects" in fiction writing, focusing on common "errors of substance" such as the use of events that are routine and general, rather than singular and specific, and the deadly use of cliché.

that it assumes saintly forbearance on the part of readers, who don't read to learn answers already known to the characters (who presumably know, for instance, their own names), but to share in their experiences and to learn, with them, the answers to questions more relevant and urgent, like: What will happen next? And how will X respond if Y happens? And what effect will X have on Z? And so on. These, you'll notice, are *plot* questions. And while it may be every writer's devout wish to raise philosophical questions in his readers, plot questions are what keep them reading.

And whatever else we do, we have to keep our readers reading, bearing in mind that *readers are rude*. Nothing compels them to keep turning pages. The slightest twinge of hunger or bladder urge may prompt them to put your story down and never pick it up again. Readers hold all the cards. They *can* be rude; you can't.

One way to be rude is to tease people. Writers who capriciously withhold information are doing just that. They do so for different reasons, chief among them that they don't trust their stories, or worse, they have no stories to tell. No wonder, then, that they hide them.

The classic example of a strategy based on withheld information is the "and then she woke up" story, wherein the reader discovers, at the last possible instant, that what she's been reading was only a dream: that all this time Pamela has been sound asleep and safe in her bed, with no blue giraffes chasing her, after all. That's good news for Pamela, but a terrible way to tell a story and a worse way to treat your reader, who invested in your fictional universe only to have it yanked like a rug out from under her. The perpetrator of such strategy might defend himself by saying, "Well, Pamela didn't *know* she was dreaming, therefore I'm not withholding any information to which my character is privy." She may not know she's dreaming, but the author knows damn well, and if he's being honest with himself and with his material, he will provide

clues to make it fairly obvious that we are reading not reality, but a dream. (Of course, he may also have to go fish for another plot.)

I call this strategy *false suspense*. And assuming your reader is sufficiently patient or gullible (ruling out most editors), it may carry him along for a few pages. But sooner or later the gig will be up; you'll have to show your hand. When it turns out you're holding nothing but a pair of deuces, the result for the few intrepid readers you have left will be resentment.

The solution is straightforward enough: Have a story to tell and tell it. *Never withhold information*. That's a bold imperative, I know, yet I feel confident stating it since I'm not the first. Eudora Welty did so before me, and she knew a thing or two about storytelling.

When you ask readers to read a story, you're asking them to take a journey with you, up a steep climb of exposition and rising action to a peak where a climax of some kind occurs. There, they'll stand alone on this precipice with an unprecedented view of the world they have just experienced, and, with any luck, of the world and life in general.

As author, you're charged with equipping the reader with all the tools and information necessary not only to reach the summit, but to appreciate the view from there. That means withholding nothing crucial or basic (hardtack, maps, rope, water), while at the same time providing nothing unnecessary or sooner than necessary (champagne, binoculars), since the journey is arduous and every unneeded bit of information makes it more so.

False suspense weighs your reader down with useless yet burdensome questions. Saddle your readers with it, and you not only make the climb much harder, you spoil the view from the top when they get there.

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Peter Selgin's novel *Life Goes to the Movies* was twice a finalist for the James Jones Fellowship. *Bodies of Water*, his collection of stories, was a finalist for three national awards. The New York City writer teaches at Gotham Writers' Workshop, edits *Alimentum: The Literature of Food*, and is author of the just-published *By Cunning & Craft: Sound Advice and Practical Wisdom for Fiction Writers*.